

SPIRIT OF THE PIONEER

A newsletter for the families and friends of
the Eugene Pioneer Cemetery
(Across from McArthur Court)

FALL 2013

MYSTERY OF THE ABOVE GROUND VAULT IN EUGENE PIONEER CEMETERY

by *Mark A. Mattison*

After painstaking efforts by EPCA board members Dorothy Brandner and George Beebe, as well as local contractors, in late August the cemetery's only above ground grave was impressively restored.

For more than 100 years the unmarked crypt's modest but elegant design stood it apart from all other memorials. Unusual for this region, the above ground grave has been a source of curiosity and mystery for many who have passed by Lot 463, which is located next to a small shade tree in the southeast quadrant of the cemetery.

Over the years, the question of why this style was chosen became overshadowed by the question of who is at rest there.

For decades, local legend had it that in the early 1900s a dying girl pleaded to her parents not to be buried in the "cold dark ground." After succumbing to diphtheria, it was believed that her parents honored her wish and arranged for the above ground, formed concrete tomb.

It's a lovely story, but the adult-size of the tomb and other factors have had some wondering if this was in fact true.

As decades came and went freezing and thawing gradually took its toll on the vault's exterior. In the mid-1980s, Mr. Bob Lacey – then Chairman of Pioneer Memorial Park Association – personally repaired and repainted the vault's exterior so it would look pretty again.

Still, huge running cracks developed along the length of the structure. It had been originally covered in plaster, most of which had fallen off to expose the concrete.

The three-month long effort to restore and identify the grave was mainly taken on by EPCA members Dorothy Brandner and George Beebe. Dorothy, an amateur genealogist, researched local records to determine, once and for all, who was interred there so long ago. George, a long time board member, organized the restoration effort of the structure with local contractors. Both tasks were equally daunting.

Prior to starting the project Dorothy & George consulted with Denny Hellesvig from Eugene Masonic Cemetery.

However, before the tomb could be repaired the extent of the damage had to be ascertained. Eric Satterthwaite from the Musgrove Family Mortuary was called as he had experience with opening and closing large, concrete funerary structures. Eric proceeded to drill holes into the lower part of the vault and drained water that had penetrated the structure. As it turned out, there was a lot of it. "The flow of water exiting the crypt was like someone had turned on a faucet." described Dorothy.

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ABOVE GROUND VAULT – After Restoration

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Eugene Pioneer
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Any Comments or
Questions?
Please write or
phone us!

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ABOVE GROUND VAULT (Cont. from Pg.1)

Hours, and hours of hand labor were involved in scraping the exterior of the above ground vault (see photo at the right). Brad Simmons of A-1 Power Washing, and Dorothy Brandner, then washed the vault.

Specialists from Belfor Property Restoration were hired to dehumidify the vault to dry up residual moisture. There was also a brief scan of the interior with an orthoscopic camera to determine if the interior was adequately dry.

As to the presence of human remains, the camera was not able to pick up any clear images according to George Beebe.

Rebuilding the tomb, Eugene Plastering applied an outer covering to the concrete. Using modern techniques, a fiber glass mesh was placed over the concrete surface before a more weather resistant plaster was added. Combined, both materials now provide an outer plaster shell that expands and contracts more efficiently considering Oregon's fluctuations in outdoor temperature and humidity.

Finally the structure was primed and painted with a high quality exterior paint in a very understated yet pleasant light blue.

During the project a temporary fence was erected [Dorothy Brandner and George Beebe busy at work on it] courtesy of the Eugene Fencing Company to protect the work from the curious and less respectful visitors of the cemetery, and also to protect Belfor's equipment.

One of the less obvious features of the restoration, but certainly the one of the most important, was the digging of a drainage trench around the grave extending below the base. Filled with river stone and covered in landscaping material, it provides additional protection against the water damage that nearly led to the destruction of the monument. This portion of the project was under taken by George Beebe personally. After the entire project was finished, George Beebe commented, "All people we talked with, and all our contractors were superb."

And so, finally, who is interred in this unique place of rest?

Dorothy's research -- which included I.O.O.F, county and mortuary records -- concluded, "to at least 99 percent accuracy" -- that the grave belongs to one Lille Belle Ross Smith who died at age 39. She is obviously not the little girl of local myth.

Lillie Belle and her husband George Smith moved to Lane county around 1909 from Indiana. They had a total of seven children that included at least four daughters. Sadly three of these children did not survive childhood and died before the family moved to Oregon.

During her investigation, Dorothy accounted for all the Smith's children in Oregon who had lived to adulthood. They are interred at various cemeteries throughout Lane County and Portland. However, Dorothy notes that she can't be 100 percent certain that Lillie Belle is indeed the one in the above ground vault without confirmation from the family. Attempts to locate any surviving descendants have not been successful.

So, with the mystery solved, a plaque will be placed at the site identifying the crypt as Lille Belle's final resting place. However, one question does remain. Why did her husband George build such an unusual memorial?

At the time of Lilly's death, the Smith's had been married for 22 years and had four surviving children together. As Dorothy discovered, on the funeral bill the fee for the "opening and closing" of the grave was crossed out. Perhaps George Smith, a plasterer by trade, was a simple man of minimal means who was trying to afford a dignified burial for his wife. Did he have a role in creating the tomb?

One could speculate for hours, but now that the restoration work is complete it is hoped by all that the above ground vault will be around for another 100 years. Just maybe some answers will come forward. Even without family members to fill in the story's gaps, it can be said that the Eugene Pioneer Cemetery's only above ground tomb was a touch point for Lillie Belle's family who continued on after her passing. Today the lovely above ground vault endures as a symbol of a life that was well spent.



ABOVE GROUND VAULT – Before Restoration

CEMETERY WORK PARTIES

Quentin A. Holmes, EPCA President

Each year, EPCA board member George Beebe organizes both a Spring and a Fall Work Party. One is on the Friday preceding Memorial Day, the other is on the Friday before Labor Day. Months ahead, George contacts the Lane County Sheriff's office and arranges for a ten-person crew of people who need to perform Community Service. Two weeks ahead, George holds a "walk through" with Board Members to decide which section of the Cemetery needs attention most.

Our Spring Work Party (May 24th) worked on the East side of the Cemetery that lies to the South of the primary East-West gravel road. Our Fall Work Party (Aug. 30th) focused on the East side of the Cemetery that lies to the North of the primary East-West gravel road. The work party dates for 2014 are:

Spring Work Party:

Walkthrough – Thur. May 15, 2014 at 11:30
Work Party – Fri. May 23, 2014 9:00 - 2:30

Plan to come out and join us. It is amazing what a difference one day can make – when you are helping alongside a Ten-Person Crew in the Cemetery!



GEORGE BEEBE – Giving Instructions to the Sheriff's Crew

Fall Work Party

Walkthrough – Thurs. Aug. 21, 2014 at 11:30
Work Party – Fri. Aug. 29, 2014 9:00 - 2:30

THIS IS A CEMETERY

Lives are commemorated - deaths are recorded - families are reunited - memories are made tangible - and love is undisguised. This is a Cemetery.

Communities accord respect, families bestow reverence, historians seek information and our heritage is thereby enriched.

Testimonies of devotion, pride and remembrance are carved in stone to pay warm tribute to accomplishments and to the life - not death - of a loved one. The cemetery is homeland for family memorials that are a sustaining source of comfort to the living.

A cemetery is a history of people - a perpetual record of yesterday and a sanctuary of peace and quiet today. A cemetery exists because every life is worth loving and remembering - always.
(Mary Lou Brannon)

SEEN RECENTLY IN THE CEMETERY



HERITAGE ROSES IN BLOOM ON THE KINCAID LOT.

NEW "COURTESY SIGNS" IN OUR CEMETERY

The Eugene Pioneer Cemetery is a non-smoking area. Dogs are allowed, and welcome. However, our Cemetery's rules require them to be kept on a leash – the same as the city of Eugene does, and the same as Lane County does. To remind people of these rules new "Courtesy Signs" have been put up at various locations throughout the Cemetery.
[Thank you for donating the signs, Mr. Tim King!]

Welcome to
EUGENE PIONEER CEMETERY

Please
Respect the Graves and Monuments
Keep Dogs on Leashes
No Smoking in the Cemetery

Thank You

EUGENE PIONEER CEMETERY ENDOWMENT FUND

by Quentin A. Holmes, EPCEF Board Member

The Eugene Pioneer Cemetery was established in an era before perpetual care cemeteries. In those days people relied on relatives who lived nearby to keep up the family burial plot and help keep the Cemetery grounds looking nice. Today, a few families are still able to actively maintain their own lot. However, most of our older members are no longer physically able to maintain their family lot. In addition, we live in an era when younger generations often live far removed from where they grew up. Hence, our Cemetery relies on annual donations to the Association and interest earned on the Endowment Fund to pay for mowing, pruning, gravel, signage, upkeep and improvements. Please consider a donation to The Fund, now, or in your estate plans. Your capital contributions to The Fund will be preserved permanently to generate income to help with Cemetery maintenance and improvements. Your donations are tax deductible. The Endowment Fund's non-profit registration numbers are: Federal: 51-0175540; State: 110200-13.

Eugene Pioneer Cemetery Association

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ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

